



Last Sunday After Epiphany  
Light of Christ Anglican Church  
The Rev. Mike Moffitt, February 11, 2018

*Jesus, the Only Hope He Had*

Text: [Mark 1:40–45](#)

We live in a time where not a day goes by that that I don't read a headline or hear a story about sickness and disease of some type. I heard that there are five different strains of the flu going around and nearly everyone that I talk to has some health concerns, whether major or minor. I read a statistic that there are more than 300,000 over-the-counter (OTC) medicines, and that the average American spends \$338 a year on OTC medicines alone—not including the prescription drug industry where in 2015, according to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, Americans spent \$325 billion dollars. Germs are a major concern and it's not a matter of over-emphasis or paranoia but a legitimate reality of life.

However, this is not a recent development and in one way or another it has been a consideration for as long as there has been civilization. Today many Americans seldom consider that billions of people around the world live in abject poverty and squalor thereby face many chronic diseases. As a rule, I'm not the type who is overly concerned about germs, but I've shared with you before how overwhelmed I was on my first trip to Africa where I daily dealt with people who lived in excessively filthy conditions and had virtually no concerns about sanitation. For the most part they weren't being negligent, they just didn't know. I was there as a pastor who had come to minister and teach but also to see first-hand the needs of those dear sweet

people in order to recommend ways that we could assist them in their lives.

Our church had an on-going relationship with Ghanga, a small village in Rwanda and we sent teams there twice a year for two or three weeks each time, helping them establish water a recovery system and schools. In the capitol city of Kilgali, many people seemed much like you would find them in other places but in the small towns there was severe poverty, disease, and a real shortage of clean water. There were rules that we needed to follow concerning drinking water and even bathing because of bacteria that our bodies were not used to.

It was my first time there and I found the people to be genuinely relational but they loved to touch and hug, even though many appeared to have a grayish tint because they hadn't bathed in a while. Wherever we went they wanted to hold my hand and the children wanted me to get down on my knees and hug them. I continually reprimanded myself for being so squeamish, but in truth I was more uncomfortable than I had ever been in my life. I remember praying for God's protection from disease and to let me see the people through his eyes. I sensed the Lord asking me to imagine how Jesus would have dwelt in their midst and I tried to focus on that.

However, one little boy who for some reason was just taken with me and wanted to go with me and hold my hand. He just chatted away happily but of course I never had any idea what he was talking about. All I could see was that he was so dirty and nasty and I was so relieved when they pulled him away from me. When I got in the van to leave, he crawled in next to me but one of the workers pulled him back out. I can still see the look of rejection on his little face, and his cries as I rode away in our van. I later wept in shame as I had the mental picture of Jesus hearing his cries and getting out of the van, sitting in the dirt with that precious little guy on his

lap, kissing him on the head and loving him like only Jesus can. That little boy was the missionary to me that day as God used him to reveal my heart to me, but it was also how God taught me of the depth of his unconditional love.

This week as I considered our gospel and Old Testament readings, that scene from Rwanda in 2008 played again over and over in my mind as I considered the stories of the two men who had leprosy but found healing through the love and power of God.

Let's first consider our Gospel passage and read Mark 1:40–42,

*And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, "If you will, you can make me clean." 41 Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, "I will; be clean." 42 And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.*

Leprosy was one of the most feared diseases in the ancient world due to the belief that it was highly contagious. It has since been discovered that it isn't very contagious when caught early before it develops skin eruptions and it's now treatable with medication. It is still found in areas where poverty and chronic unsanitary conditions exist. It's reported that there are around 15 million people today infected in areas of India, China, and Africa. I won't go into what happens to those who have the disease and leave it untreated but suffice it to say that it is horrible. Mother Teresa ministered in Calcutta for many years taking care of those with Leprosy, HIV/Aids and tuberculosis.

In the ancient Middle East, the physical suffering, although terrible, was most likely not as bad as the social stigma. In the Old Testament there were strict instructions in God's law as how to deal with those who had leprosy ([Leviticus 13–14](#)). Lepers had to be quarantined and examined by the priest

every seven days to see if it was spreading or merely some other type of skin reaction. If it was finally determined that it was a leprous disease, there would be skin eruptions and the person was now considered contagious. That being the case they had to dress like those who were in mourning for the dead, because they were considered “the living dead”. They had to warn people whenever they drew near by crying out “Unclean, unclean”.

In the time of Jesus, the people went even further than the word of God taught:

...they thought two things about a leper: you are the walking dead and you deserve this because this is the punishment of God against you. Jewish custom said that you should not even greet a leper. Custom said you had to stay six feet (two meters) from a leper. One Rabbi bragged that he would not even buy an egg on a street where he saw a leper, and another boasted that he threw rocks at lepers to keep them far from him. One other Rabbi didn't even allow a leper to wash his face. (David Guzik, Commentary on 2 Kings)

Someone who was considered unclean, whether from a skin disease like leprosy or other types and in situations like the woman who had chronic bleeding in Mark 5, were forbidden to attend synagogue or temple to worship. These places were where most every social event was held, so basically if you were considered “unclean” you were a complete outcast from society.

This is the situation that the leper in our reading found himself in. Mark doesn't say whether the man came to Jesus under cover of darkness or maybe he found him alone in prayer, but either way he was taking a risk in coming to him. No doubt he had heard the stories about Jesus' ministry in

Capernaum and Galilee, how he had healed many who were sick and cast out demons from others. So, he came to him in humility hoping for mercy instead of rejection—hoping for healing from the one person who seemed to have the power of God at his disposal. Either way there were no other options, if Jesus wouldn't remove this disease the man would die dejected and alone—an outcast.

As he knelt at the feet of Jesus he spoke in faith, "If you will, you can make me clean." In this statement the leper is proclaiming who he believes Jesus to be because in that time everyone knew that only God could heal a leper. There was no known cure and rarely did anyone just get better without a direct healing from God. The greatest need that he had was not to be healed of the physical consequences of his disease... there was much more at stake here: he needed to be made clean.

Jesus saw the obvious situation that the man was in and instead of being repulsed and jumping back in alarm, he felt compassion and he reached down and touched the man. Jesus healed many people and he often chose unique and personal ways to do so. Sometimes he just spoke the word and they were healed, sometimes he touched them, and at other times he healed from far away by speaking a word of healing instead of traveling to where the person lay ill. Either way Jesus was establishing his authority over sickness and the demonic while at the same time keeping the person in mind.

This time it wasn't merely physical healing that was needed and in touching the man, Jesus was offering more than physical healing could ever give him. How long had it been since anyone had dared touch the man? He had possibly been a leper for a long time and not only were people forbidden to touch him because of Jewish ceremonial law, nobody would want to. Most likely no one had given him a hug or caressed his face

and put their arms around his shoulder in loving affection for a long time. Lepers were made to live separately from others so there could be no contact. One of the greatest needs that human beings have is for the warmth of the loving touch of another human being and Jesus knew that very well. In touching the man, he was declaring that he had value and that he mattered, so he responded with a touch and the assurance, "I will, be clean".

I can't imagine what it felt like for that man in that moment but verse 42 says that, "and immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean."

Jesus had not merely healed his body of a hideous, disfiguring, and painful disease but he restored his life as a member of the community and of his own family. Even more importantly, he restored him to the place of dignity and hope.

Let's read again Mark 1:43-45,

*And Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once, 44 and said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to them." 45 But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places, and people were coming to him from every quarter.*

In order for the man to be legally restored to normal life in the synagogue and social settings he would need to go to the priest and show that he had indeed become clean. Jesus told him to do this first to honor the law of God, but also as a testimony to the priests that an incurable disease had been cured. They had most likely never seen a case of leprosy cured and would need to look up in the Levitical law the ceremony for cleansing.

The elements used in the Levitical ceremony for the cleansing of a leper (cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet) are the same elements used in cleansing someone who was defiled by a dead body (Numbers 19:6, 19:13, 19:18 and Leviticus 14:4–7). In essence the man was returned from the dead and the priests, if they would only pay attention, would realize the sign that Messiah had come.

I think it interesting that Jesus told the man to tell no one what had been done for him but to merely go and show himself to the priest. Can you imagine being silent about what Jesus did for him? All things were made new and his life was restored. I can only imagine that the first thing on the man's mind as he left Jesus was, "I've got to tell somebody!" How could he keep the fact that he was made clean a secret? Even though he meant well his talking freely did serve to hinder Jesus' ministry moving freely throughout the cities and he should have done what Jesus asked, but I get why he couldn't resist. For those who by faith have encountered Jesus Christ and have through repentance been rescued and set free from sin and death, how can they not want to tell somebody what has happened?

We don't have time today to fully develop the story from our Old Testament passage in [2 Kings 5:1–15](#) but I would like to briefly compare this story with our Gospel reading. Let's read 2 Kings 5:1–3 to set the stage,

*Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Syria, was a great man with his master and in high favor, because by him the Lord had given victory to Syria. He was a mighty man of valor, but he was a leper. 2 Now the Syrians on one of their raids had carried off a little girl from the land of Israel, and she worked in the service of Naaman's wife. 3 She said to her mistress, "Would that my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."*

As recently as the days of Ahab and Jehoshaphat, Syria had fought and won against Israel. Naaman's position and success made him a great and honorable man, and personally he was a mighty man of valor. According to Jewish legends, it was Naaman who shot the arrow that killed King Ahab in 1 Kings 22. For all of his success over Syria's enemies and in spite of all the honor and glory bestowed upon him as a military hero, he was a leper. It would seem likely that at the point in our story that his disease had not yet progressed to the point where he was unable to function, but he knew that in time he too would be an outcast.

Upon finding out about the prophet in Samaria, Naaman goes to the king asking for permission to go to Samaria. The king gives him a letter to the king of Israel and Naaman takes 10 talents of silver, 6000 shekels of gold and 10 changes of clothing. The present-day value of this is approximately \$1.5 million. Naaman really wanted to be healed and the king really wanted him well.

Now you will notice that it says the Lord had used Naaman to defeat Israel and give victory to Syria. God had used an enemy of Israel to bring judgment upon Israel for their unfaithfulness to God and his law. So when Naaman goes to the King of Israel the king panics, tears his clothes, thinking that the King of Syria is trying to pick a fight. The king of Syria most likely assumed that the prophet operated at the behest of the king of Israel (probably Joram) but it never occurred to the king to call upon Elisha because Israel no longer served or worshipped God faithfully. They were blind to the things of God. Elisha hears about this and chastises the king saying,

*Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come now to me, that he may know that there is a prophet in Israel." 9 So Naaman came with his horses and chariots and stood at the door of Elisha's house.*

Naaman was expecting Elisha to come out and make a big production of healing the leper. Naaman assumed that Elisha would respect his position as a great military commander and a conqueror of Israel. He came to bring a great reward for the prophet as well, but instead Elisha sent a servant to Naaman to tell him to go and wash in the Jordan seven times. Naaman was insulted and furious at such disrespect and stomps off. It's a servant that came to Naaman and basically reasons with him by pointing out that what the prophet has told him to do wasn't that unreasonable. What could it hurt? So Naaman goes and dips himself seven times in the Jordan and,

*his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean. Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company, and he came and stood before him. And he said, "Behold, I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel."*

Naaman had found out that leprosy was no respecter of position and that all the money in the world didn't matter when his life was in jeopardy. I think he came to the prophet with that understanding, but when he left after being made clean he was far wealthier than he could ever have imagined. He had encountered the living God, creator of Heaven and Earth and had been restored.

The characters in our two stories this morning were likely very different in social position but they each found themselves without hope, humbled, in need of cleansing and healing. They each encountered the living God who was able to restore them physically but more importantly they found that he was willing to.

God made it very plain to Israel that he had raised them up to reveal to all the nations that he alone was God and to invite all to come to Him by faith and obedience. They had refused but God was not to be deterred from his

plan. He would raise up their enemies to discipline them and, in the process, reveal his power and glory to the enemy. Naaman went back to Syria as a testimony that *“there is no God in all the earth but in Israel.”* I wonder if he went back and told everybody that he met about the God in Israel?

In Mark 1, the leper who was cleansed by Jesus left that day knowing that the Messiah had come and that he had just met him. He just couldn't shut-up about something so wonderful and I get that.

I know that many of you this morning have encountered God in powerful and wonderful ways and I pray that you will never tire of telling the story of how Jesus has changed your life. There are so many who need to know that there is hope, healing, and restoration for them, too. Perhaps there are some here this morning who have never encountered God but know that something needs to change. I love the way that Psalm 42 begins, *“As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God.”* God wants to meet you here today and bring healing and cleansing to you. We will have prayer ministers up here this morning after the service who would love to talk and pray with you. I would love to speak with you at your convenience.

My prayer for myself and for us is that God will let us see those around us through his eyes and that we will not miss the opportunity to be Jesus to them, no matter how different they may seem from us. Let us be those who have the passion for Christ so that we just have to tell somebody.

Let's pray.

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